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ABSTRACT

Whether teachers are horror fans or not, part of a teacher's service to student readers is to recommend recent and good horror novels. Unlike the almost idiosyncratic horror market of years past, today a series of recognizable horror writer such as Christopher Pike, D. E. Atkins, R. L. Stine and others are turning out numerous titles specifically for young adults. In addition, the definition of horror today seems to have shifted somewhat from a reliance upon outside forces of evil to a malevolence which can be more readily explained, making horror more like a mystery or detective story than a tale of the supernatural. A final development in recent horror fiction for young adults is that really different books are rare, leaving the field dominated by R. L. Stine and Christopher Pike lookalikes. This may not mean much to horror readers who want predictability, but teachers and librarians should be aware of it. (A 14-item annotated bibliography of recent and recommended horror novels for young adults is attached.) (NH)

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THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT:
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN HORROR FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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I believe horror lovers are born and not made. While I cannot get enough of the genre, I do not think that those for whom horror is unpleasant should be forced--or even encouraged--to read the stuff. For those of us who enjoy it, however, horror is fascinating, terrifying, exhilarating, wonderful, a rollercoaster read of fantastic proportions. And, for me, while I revel in well-written thrillers, no horror is too lowly, too badly written, too lame not to be of some interest. My taste in horror goes from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the beautifully crafted to the truly Grade B. It's not that I don't have standards, it's just that I love horror and am intrigued by its many manifestations, low and high.

Those who know me know this well; this past Christmas my favorite gift under the tree was The Complete Stephen King Encyclopedia (Stephen J. Spignesi, editor, Contemporary Books, 1991) and I, probably unlike most normal people in this country, spent my holiday perusing the 778 pages (for real) of Stephen King arcana. After I was through with that tome, I turned to my new edition of the great horror classic, Bram Stoker's Dracula, and then finished up with Heebie-Jeebies at Howl High, a book so bad I

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will not even mention the author's name. Despite the quality range, it was a satisfying, horrifying Christmas holiday.

Young people, too, are often horror fans. It has not escaped most teachers' notice that many students carry in their backpacks the novels of Stephen King, Clive Barker, Dean R. Koontz, Christopher Pike, and R.L. Stine. Sometimes, like die-hard science fiction fans, horror is what these young people will, given a choice, read exclusively. Sometimes, choice or no, it is the only thing they read at all. Thus, whether we individually are horror fans or not, it is in our interest to add to our list of reading genres that of horror. Being able to recommend recent and good horror novels is part, I think, of our service to our student readers.

My historical knowledge of horror begins about fifteen years ago when I served as the reviewer for the horror section of NCTE's senior high booklist, Books for You (Robert C. Small editor, NCTE, 1982). Reading and reviewing numerous horror collections, I found the good, the bad, and the ugly. The books ranged from really excellent novels to the unspeakably awful to pseudo serious (and to me, hysterically funny) "how to" manuals for casting spells, summoning the powers of the Dark, and reading signs from the other world.

What I think I can briefly summarize from that first Books for You experience was an appreciation of the great range of good horror books. Of the 46 books I included in the horror section, the following stand out: Nina Bawden's Devil by the Sea (Avon,

1978); Harlan Ellison's Deathbird Stories (Dell, 1977); Stephen King's The Shining (Signet, 1978); Tanith Lee's Kill the Dead (Daw, 1980); Marlys Millhiser's The Mirror (Crest, 1980); Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire (Ballantine, 1979); Peter Straub's Ghost Story (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979); and Tom Tyron's Harvest Home (Crest, 1977).

Now, I am involved again in Books for You, this time as the chair of the twelfth edition and--I couldn't resist--as the reviewer of the horror category. It is, however, a different world for young adult horror, and there are three observations I would like to make.

For starters, horror is now a hot commodity. Maybe someone at the publishing houses actually looked at Stephen King's sales figures and decided to cash in with the younger market. Unlike the almost idiosyncratic horror market of years past, what seems currently in vogue is a series of recognizable horror writers turning out numerous titles specifically for young adults.

At any rate, young people can find a wealth of horror fiction, especially published by Scholastic under the Point Thriller series: D.E. Atkins, A. Bates, Caroline B. Cooney, Richie Tankersley Cusick, Carol Ellis, Diane Hoh, R.L. Stine, and others are all in the Scholastic horror stable, putting out numerous titles of very differing quality. Outside of the Scholastic group, Christopher Pike is another mega horror writer for young adults, and his books are consistently popular, part of a long string of novels he continues to churn out. In most bookstores, the Christopher Pike

shelf is wide and well stocked.

A second development is that the definition of horror seems to have shifted somewhat from a reliance upon an outside force of evil (for example, a vampire) to a more understandable, manageable, threat (for example, your neighborhood psychopath). The mysterious malevolence in Stephen King's It (Viking, 1986) or Dean R. Koontz's Darkfall (Berkley, 1984) is replaced, in many current horror novels for young people, by something which can be more readily explained.

For instance, in works of R.L. Stine (The Boyfriend, 1990; The Girlfriend, 1991; Hit and Run, 1992; The Babysitter II, 1991, all Scholastic), Carol Ellis (The Window, cited in the appendix), Richie Tankersley Cusick (Teacher's Pet, cited in the appendix), Carol Gorman (Die for Me, Avon, 1992), and Diane Hoh (The Invitation, cited in the appendix, and The Train, Scholastic, 1992), the major force of evil is an outraged, angry person, often a teenage girl, who has suffered indignity and is now getting even. In disguise or in hiding, the person wreaks vengeance upon a group and, in the end, is unmasked. This is in direct opposition to the vampire Caroline Cooney uses in two of her recent and excellent novels (cited in the appendix) and what, at least in one instance, Christopher Pike does in the popular but rather poorly plotted Monster (Pocket, 1992).

Whether this development is positive or negative is probably in the eye of the reader. Certainly it makes horror more like a mystery or detective story than a tale of the supernatural, but

that possibility is probably reserved for a philosophical discussion of the definition of horror.

Finally, the third development in recent horror fiction for young adults is there does not seem to me to be the range of work which I encountered fifteen years ago. Maybe it is the novels which have been sent to Books for You in this past year, but the really different books (such as Gerald's Game, Yaxley's Cat, Enter Three Witches, Redwork, Shock Waves, and Phoenix Fire, all listed in the appendix) are absolutely the rarity, leaving the field dominated by R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike lookalikes. The formulaic quality of the latter novels is unmistakable, and the differences between them minimal. This factor may not mean much to horror readers who want that predictability, but it is good for us, as teachers and librarians, to know.

But, hope springs eternal in this horror lover's heart. There are surely writers out there working, even as we speak, on vampires who thrill and monsters who kill, on ghoulies and ghosties and things that go bump in the night. Good Lord, deliver them to us! I, for one, am always waiting expectantly.

APPENDIX

PICK OF THE PACK

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED HORROR NOVELS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Bedard, Michael. Redwork. **Avon, 1990.**

The old house to where Cass and his mother have just moved is said to be haunted---in part by the owner, an elderly World War I vet who lives downstairs and only leaves his rooms at night. Cass is curious: is the man really a witch? is he just a lonely old person? Regardless, what is he doing night after night in the garage? And what is that strange low sound coming from the garage windows? Well written, literature with a satisfying ending, Redwork is suspenseful and informative.

Cooney, Caroline B. The Cheerleader. **Scholastic, 1991.**

"'Suppose,' [the vampire] said, its voice like antique silk, faded and slightly torn, 'that I could make you popular.'" For sweet but lonely Althea, it is an offer too irresistible to refuse, and overnight the 15-year old becomes one of the most popular girls at school--a girl with friends, dates, party invitations, surrounded by smiles and attention, a girl who becomes a cheerleader.

But it is all due to the vampire--who never gives without expecting return. What does he want from Althea? If he doesn't get it, what will happen to the most popular girl in town? A

spine-tingler with a surprise ending.

Cooney, Caroline B. **The Return of the Vampire.** **Scholastic, 1991.**

Plain Devnee, the new girl in town who has moved into the haunted house, encounters the vampire in this sequel to The Cheerleader. Like her predecessor, who made a contract with the vampire to be popular, Devnee wishes for Aryssa's beauty and Victoria's intelligence. Her conscience hurts her when she both gets her wishes and the other girls are destroyed, but when the vampire threatens her mother, Devnee's unholy alliance with the evil creature changes. Will Devnee have the courage to turn her back on her new life--even to save her mother?

Cusick, Richie Tankersley. **Teacher's Pet.** **Scholastic, 1990.**

At the urging of her high school creative writing teacher, Kate goes to a week-long writers' conference in the country, only to find herself the center of a murder plot. Who wants to kill the talented Kate, the writing conference darling, the teacher's pet? Is it Gideon, the handsome but tormented writing instructor? Is it William, Gideon's brother, the alcoholic genius? Is it Pearce, the watchful, creepy caretaker? Is it Rowena, Gideon's jealous sister who may--or may not be--dead? Or is Denzil, the funny but odd friend? This complicated, well-crafted tale will leave you guessing until the very end.

Davidson, Nicole. The Stalker. Avon, 1992.

Jennifer likes her part time job at Caramelbun, a bakery at the mall. It gives her extra money and allows her to get away from her strict father. But closing up alone late one night, Jennifer is nearly killed, attacked by someone hiding in the dark, empty mall. Who would want to kill Jennifer? And is her attack related to another murder in the mall, unsolved for these many months? Well written, suspenseful, with an unexpected ending.

Ellis, Carol. The Window. Scholastic, 1992.

Jody doesn't know everyone in the group well, but the week-long ski trip to a great resort gives her an opportunity to make new friends. The fun stops, though, when Jody falls on the slopes and has to spend the rest of the week nursing a sprained ankle. Bored, restless, she stares out her bedroom window--and sees a murder. Unfortunately, the murderer sees her, too, and comes back to silence Jody.

Forrest, Elizabeth. Phoenix Fire. Daw, 1992.

In this complicated tale of Chinese myth and the reality of today's Los Angeles come two ancient beasts, the Phoenix and the Demon, who reemerge from centuries' slumber to fight to the death. Through Susan, a young widow, El, an amateur archaeologist, and others, the stage is set for a titanic--and deadly--confrontation.

Gilmore, Kate. **Enter Three Witches.** **Scholastic, 1992.**

Bren is an ordinary kid living in New York City. His parents are separated, he is falling in love with a girl in his class, and this semester he is heavily involved in the school production of Macbeth. Bren, however, lives, literally, with three witches: both is mother and grandmother are, and their attic boarder also practices black magic. What is a normal kid to do? Funny, well written book in which the witches win.

Hoh, Diane. **The Invitation.** **Scholastic, 1991.**

The spoiled and very rich Cass Rockingham always has an extravagant fall party at her family's mansion--but who cares anyway because only the most popular kids are invited. That is, until this fall, when Sarah Drew and her four nobody friends get invitations to Cass' bash. The five are puzzled, but they decide to go--after all, maybe Cass really likes them. Not! The evening is filled with the unexpected, including one death, and the center of the mystery is very surprising.

King, Stephen. **Gerald's Game.** **Viking, 1992.**

For mature readers, this tale of terror and death may be King at his best. A woman alone faces a virtually impossible situation and survives it. In the process, she revisits her past and comes to some understanding of a childhood trauma. For extra amusement, King throws in a macabre twist which not only heightens terror but makes the tale both real and surreal. Strong language, adult

situations but, for horror lovers who can handle it, this is primo stuff.

Stine, R.L. **Beach House.** **Scholastic, 1992.**

Set on stilts at the ocean's edge, the beach house is the focus of this convincing and taut time-travel thriller. Two groups of teens, one in the summer of 1956, one in the summer of the present year, frolic and romance near and around the empty, mysterious beach house. Separated by the decades, the teens' stories intertwine--as does their danger--for some one, for some reason, is killing them one by one.

Westall, Robert. **Yaxley's Cat.** **Scholastic, 1991.**

Rose is on vacation with her bored teenage children, Tim and Jane, when the three meander into a small village in the country. Walking near the sea, they encounter an intriguing cottage for rent, and they change plans and decide to stay for a week. The cottage holds treasure, mysterious books, and a secret: it also holds the threat of murder and danger to the family. Yaxley's cat is one clue in this tightly written, suspenseful novel which ends all too soon. Some British terms and dialogue, but most readers will catch on quickly.

Westwood, Chris. **Shock Waves.** **Clarion, 1992.**

Leigh is a promising but lonely young art student in her first year of college. Through a dating service, Apollo Introductions,

though, she meets and quickly falls in love with Stephen, who seems to be the answer to her dreams. It's just too good to be true--and when Leigh's friends start dying, and Stephen's behavior seems stranger and stranger, Leigh wonders if Stephen is the answer to her prayers--or the beginning of a nightmare.

White, Ellen Emerson. "The Boy Next Door." In Thirteen: 13 Tales of Horror by 13 Masters of Horror. T. Pines, editor. Scholastic, 1991.

The short story collection edited by Pines is a snooze, clumsily using about every horror cliche there is. It is worth buying the book, however, to have a copy of the last story, a chiller/thriller whopper by Ellen Emerson White with an incredible twist ending. Even the jaded horror reader just might be surprised.